

Zenobia – queen of the desert

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The third century A.D. produced very many emperors and very few writers capable of making sense of the confused events which many subsequent historians have called a ‘crisis’. From the murder of the emperor Severus Alexander in 235 until that of Carinus exactly fifty years later no less than sixty people claimed the imperial title and the vast majority of them died a violent death. Their claims were usually supported by one of the many armies which were stationed in the different parts of the empire. It seems that by this time the empire had become too unwieldy for a single person to govern by himself. It was also during this period that the boundaries of the empire came under threat in a number of places: from the Persians in the East, or the Goths across the Danube and Rhine in the North. As the costs of war increased, the economy deteriorated with commercial activities disrupted, farming suffering, tax-collection inefficient, and increasingly rampant inflation. Against this background Syria on the border with Persia produced its fair share of would-be Roman rulers (including Philip the Arab, emperor for five years from 244 and in charge when the Romans celebrated the 1000th year of the foundation of their city by Romulus). But they are incidental to my purpose. The protagonists of this story are rather a local king of Palmyra (a city in central Syria and a Roman colony since A.D. 212) who loyally and efficiently helped to support the empire against its enemies, and his widow who then chose to lead her people away from Roman rule. Why the change in Palmyra’s allegiance? Their names are Odenathus and Zenobia.

Introducing Odenathus

Septimius Odenathus was born around 220: his name underlines the sense in which Palmyra was on the border between the Roman empire and the rest of the world. His first name indicates that his family gained Roman citizenship under the Severan emperors, his second means ‘little ear’ in Arabic. His family’s status and wealth, together with the early events in his life, remain obscure. Through inscriptions we can chart the range of titles which accrued to him: he was ‘*ras tadmor*’ (chief of Tadmor) and ‘*senator*’ by 252, ‘*consularis*’ by 258, ‘*corrector/institutor totius Orientis*’ (ruler of all the East) under Gallienus (emperor 259–268). He was a military commander of distinction and success. Under the second king of the Sassanid dynasty, Shapur I, the Persians had launched a series of campaigns against the eastern Roman provinces with Syria as a

Palmyra, ‘City of Palms’ or, as it is known in Semitic, ‘City of Dates’, is a desert city. Its position in the buffer zone between Persia and the Roman empire and on the old silk road between China and the Mediterranean enabled it to grow rich. Much of its impressive architecture is still visible today: lengthy colonnades, major streets, an agora, theatre, temples, and sculpture.

prime target: the city of Antioch was captured and that of Dura Europus destroyed. In 259, the Roman emperor himself, at that time Valerian, was seized by the Persians: Valerian was forced to kneel on all fours for the Sassanid dynast who used him as a mounting block to sit on his horse. When he died in captivity in

Persia his skin was stripped from his body, dyed red, and displayed in the centre of the Persian capital.

Initially, by virtue of diplomacy, Odenathus kept Palmyra safe – but by 262 he had taken the fight to the Persians, chasing them back to the River Euphrates. In effect he saved the empire and certainly earned the emperor’s gratitude. When he soon afterwards led his troops to the Sassanid city of Ctesiphon itself (a city long fought over and previously captured by the Romans) he was in a position to proclaim himself emperor – others had done so before and would do so in the future – but he was apparently content to have the power, prestige, and honours without the title ‘Augustus’. Not that his modesty protected him. At a family gathering in 267 Odenathus and his eldest son, Hairan, who enjoyed substantial joint power with him, were murdered by a cousin called Maeianus. His motives are unknown, though a conspiracy was quickly suspected. In the name of Odenathus’ second son, Vallabathus, his widow Septimia Zenobia took over his position as head of the Palmyrene kingdom and for the next five years she dominated the politics of the region.

Zenobia, warrior princess

Whether or not she was implicated in her husband’s assassination (to protect the interests of her son against those of her stepson), Zenobia quickly ensured that the trappings of his power passed to the young boy Vallabathus. Titles which should have been in the gift of the emperor were awarded to him by his mother. This secured his legitimacy and the continued prestige of his city. Zenobia had the support of some good advisers, including an excellent general called Zabda and the eminent philosopher and former head of Plato’s Academy in Athens, Cassius Longinus. It is difficult to get at the ‘real’ Zenobia – her enemies and subsequent victors have blackened her character to such an extent that it is possible to lose sight of the probability that her actions were motivated by a sincere desire to take seriously the duties and responsibilities which she took on for her young son. In the years 267–272, Zenobia emerged as a shrewd and capable woman with many of the qualities of a ‘warrior queen’ and the imagination to rule a large, ethnically diverse area with sensitivity as well as ambition.

While the emperor and his forces were engaged on more than one front fighting the Goths in Europe, Zenobia consolidated her power in the lands formerly overseen by her husband. She turned her attention first to the south of Palmyra, defeating the Roman governor of Arabia, marching unopposed down the Jordan Valley and heading for Egypt. Political unrest there, together with the absence of the Prefect and the news that the emperor Claudius II Gothicus had died of the plague, combined to weaken Roman resistance to Palmyrene occupation. The Prefect returned and briefly regained Alexandria for Rome, but was soon defeated by Zabda and then committed suicide.

Zenobia exploited her control of the mint at Alexandria to issue coins linking Vallabathus with Claudius’ successor, Aurelian, as joint rulers. She was mistress of northern Syria in no time at all (and another mint at Antioch) and with Zabda’s help she extended her power over nearly all Asia Minor. Only Bithynia resisted her advance – a small detail, but a crucial bridgehead for Aurelian when he chose to fight back. It appears that the spring of 272 marked the turning point, probably when Aurelian was told that coins were circulating in the eastern provinces of his empire without his head on them – no longer

Vallabathus and Aurelian, but Vallabathus alone or with Zenobia.

The empire strikes back

One of the crisis-ridden century's better emperors, Aurelian was a good general and politician who had served a very useful apprenticeship under his predecessors, Gallienus and Claudius. He first dispatched Probus (a future emperor) to Egypt: the fleet arrived in May and by the third week of June the Palmyrenes were out of power. In Asia Minor Aurelian led the army from Bithynia, through Galatia towards the first city to resist, Tyana. Initially angry at the opposition ('In this town I will not leave even a dog alive'), Aurelian softened after the citizens' capitulation and granted them clemency. When his soldiers complained, having been disappointed in their hope of rich plunder, he ordered every dog in the city to be killed. This combination of clemency and cruelty persuaded many other cities to welcome him as he advanced towards Syria. He defeated the army of Zenobia and Zabda in two key battles, at Immae and Emesa. In the former, the Roman cavalry won the day, in the latter, it was the infantry. Zenobia led the flight back to Palmyra, and Aurelian duly followed. The city was quickly surrounded and Zenobia felt that her only hope was in winning over her husband's former Persian enemies by diplomacy. Her agents returned empty-handed, so she decided to set out secretly in person to negotiate. But news of her departure was leaked to the Romans who promptly captured her. Aurelian was master of Palmyra.

Dead but not forgotten

After a trial in Emesa, where Zabda, Longinus, and many others were put to death, Zenobia was spared, not because she was a woman or a queen or a worthy opponent of the successful Roman emperor, but in order to be humiliated. She was led in chains through the cities which she and her husband had previously governed: Roman rule was reasserted and a severe lesson was taught. Often she was led on a camel to the town's hippodrome or amphitheatre to be put in a pillory (a wooden frame with holes into which her head and hands could be locked) for days on end. She was led in this way to Rome itself where she was the climax of Aurelian's triumphal procession.

Her subsequent fate is not known for certain. There were those who recorded her death in captivity, but others state that she enjoyed a dignified retirement at a villa in Tibur, that she married a well-placed Roman and that her descendants were prominent figures in the city a century later. She was one of the most romantic figures of classical antiquity who deserves to be better known and undoubtedly would be if there had been a worthy historian to chronicle and comment upon her troubled times. What would Herodotus or Tacitus have made of such a character and such events? We must content ourselves with later sources to give colour. Chaucer (in 'The Monk's Tale' in *The Canterbury Tales*) and Edward Gibbon (in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*) provide tantalizing glimpses of what might have been.

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